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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001479

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL  
COMMERCE FOR ITA JEAN KELLY  
TREASURY FOR OASIA JEFF NEIL  
USPACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: SCUL PINS PGOV PHUM BM  
SUBJECT: ONWARD BUDDHIST SOLDIERS!

REF: RANGOON 1361

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In Burma, the Buddhist monkhood is a force second in size and power only to the ruling military. The Burmese government has coerced and cajoled the country's most senior abbots into political line, thus indirectly controlling the rank and file. However, the monkhood is a large and diverse group, and the senior abbots may not have the respect they once commanded. Thus, the GOB's ironclad control over the whole group may be impermanent. End summary.

Proverb: "Where Civil Power Fails, Religious Power is Required"

¶2. (U) At 400,000 strong, Burma's Buddhist monkhood, or sangha, is a force matched only in manpower by the equally robust Burmese military. This number does not include the estimated 100,000 Buddhist nuns, women who have taken the tonsure to receive religious education, but who have no political power and do not receive the same respect from society as do their male counterparts. The sangha is highly revered (as the military was) and is a vital element of Burmese history and national identity. Like the military, the sangha defies easy categorization and generalizations. However, there is an organizational structure and some basic delineations that clarify the political role played by this important civil society group.

¶3. (U) Traditionally, the reigning civil authority is reluctant to take direct action against the monkhood. Instead, orders and guidance impacting the sangha come directly from a 10-member ruling committee and its 47-member working committee. Thus, control of these committees, comprised of senior abbots from around the country, is essential to control of the country's monks. Not surprisingly, the GOB's Ministry of Religious Affairs hand-picks the committee members.

A Sect for Every Monk

¶4. (SBU) Beneath the state-controlled governing bodies, the monkhood is divided into three main sects: Thudamma, Shwekyin, and Nget Twin.

-- Thudamma: The largest and most influential sect. Thudamma is comparatively liberal in discipline and doctrine and is close to the government. The sect's leaders are generally chosen because of a close relationship with SPDC officials. The GOB often gives abbots from this sect preference when filling vacancies on the national sangha committees.

-- Shwekyin: The second largest sect. Shwekyin is much more conservative, requiring its members to practice austerity and strict adherence to Buddhist principles. Though leaders of this sect tend to strike a politically neutral position, dealing with both the GOB and the democratic opposition, the Burmese leadership lends support to this sect because of its size and its solid reputation in international Buddhist circles. The leader of the Shwekyin is always named vice chairman of the aforementioned sangha working committee.

-- Nget Twin: The smallest of the three sects. Nget Twin members have a religious and political profile close to that of the Thudamma sect, but are not involved in social activities.

Young Man, There's a Place You Can Go

¶5. (SBU) These days, Buddhism's political influence lies with the sangha and its associations. Buddhism's original political arm, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), founded in 1906, played a crucial role during the early fight for Burmese independence. However, the organization is a shell of its former self. The YMBA's current leader avows the group is apolitical, focusing now on promoting Buddhist education for children -- a campaign encouraged by the government -- and other humanitarian work. The Ministry of Health, grasping around for local, independent NGOs to shore

up an application to the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM), drafted the YMBA to help provide HIV/AIDS education. The YMBA will do this, by encouraging children to live clean, ethical lives according to Buddhist principles.

Proverb: "A Monk's Greed is Immeasurable"

¶6. (C) There is a long tradition in Burma of Buddhist monks leading opposition to unjust rulers. Recognizing this, the military regime has displayed impressive stick and carrot work over the last 15 years to intimidate and co-opt the sangha's senior leadership and thus ensure the rank-and-file monks remain politically "correct." However, the sangha is not an entirely neutralized political force. Many senior monks, especially of the Shwekyin faction, try to avoid choosing sides. Furthermore, the abbots' control of their acolytes, many of whom are not lifelong monks, may not be unquestioned. We've heard reliable accounts of young novices, though sworn to obedience and humility, grumbling over the cash and prizes they see the government heaping upon their greedy leaders. Such grumbling may continue following the November 6th decision of the sangha working committee, with quiet direction from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to close monastic schools, and impose a curfew on remaining monks, to avoid further Muslim-Buddhist violence (reftel).  
Martinez